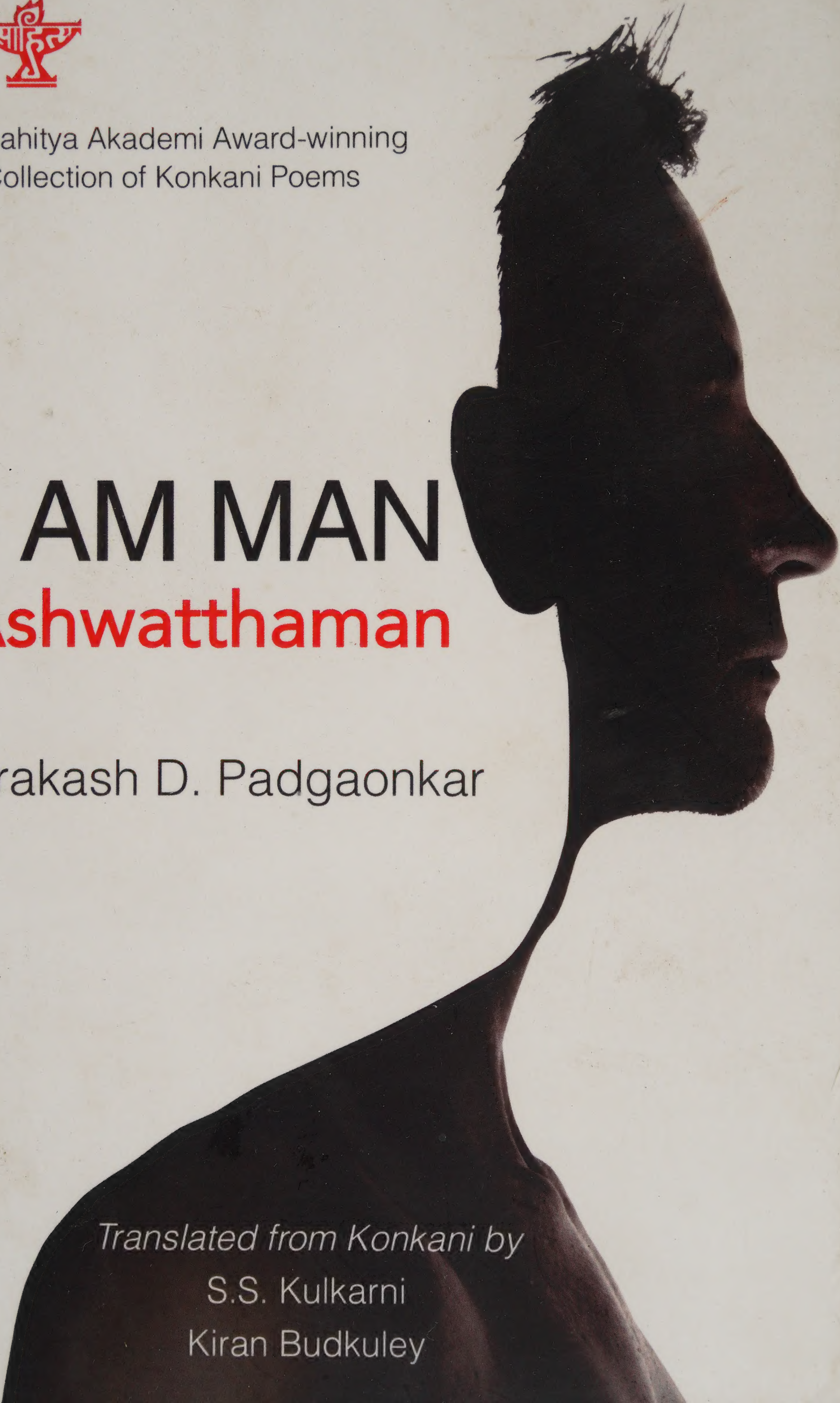
Sahitya Akademi Award-winning
Collection of Konkani Poems

I AM MAN
Ashwatthaman

Prakash D. Padgaonkar



Translated from Konkani by
S.S. Kulkarni
Kiran Budkuley





I Am Man – Ashwatthaman

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

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Contents

1

I am Man – Ashwatthaman

I am Man–
I am Ashwatthaman.

Though I have mother, father, brothers, sisters,
Kith and kin
I am alone, forlorn!

Like an irredeemable island lost while in
Search of itself
I become labourer, officer, professor and leader,
Thief, beggar, painter, sculptor, advocate and soldier,
I manipulate machines,
I cultivate fields and farms,
I new-fashion the society around me
I see to it that I am lionised and adored in society.
I am the only Man diffused all over the world-
I am Ashwatthaman:

I am Ashwatthaman.
I do not know the true aim of my life.
Repudiated and confused, with scalding torment
My eyes overflowing,
I go on wandering on the sandy roads of time
Millennium after millennium

With the load of affliction that eternity has piled on me,
Questing for the ointment likely to heal my fatal wound!

I am Man in the modern world!
 I am Ashwatthaman!

□□□

2

The Sun's Sorrow

Hearing the merry noise issuing from the stars
Twinkling in the darkness of my life,
The sun outstretched before me his hand of light
And begged for the gift of darkness.

I said to the sun:
The whole city rises when you arrive
And sets as you depart.
A veritable flood of effulgence are you.
Radiant seeds of successive seasons
Start sprouting with fruitfulness
In each of your infinite rays.
Such being the case,
How come you beg for a dole of darkness?

The sun answered:
A curse of light befalls my life!
That is why I cannot perceive darkness.
In my life of light's splendour,
Darkness I am unable to sense.
What kind of thing is darkness?
I have no knowledge of this phenomenon.
I possess not even the slightest impression
Of the endless profundity of the dark void

I added:
Just as hot tears issue from the eyes
When the torrent of sorrow bursts its banks,
In the great ocean of noiseless darkness
Radiant stars, like exquisite boatlets,
Keep on moving in the midst of darkness.
Close your eyes for a moment,
And you will see darkness piled on deep darkness!

The Sun replied:
O Mortal, who are blessed,
Never, never shall that be for me!
I am the self-born orb of boundless light.
I have nothing but light in my life.
My eyes cannot enjoy the sight of darkness.
Your life is blessed with light and dark.
But even when I shut my eyes tight,
I see only dazzling light cast everywhere.
This is why I stand before you
Stretching out my lowered hands and
Begging for a dole of blissful darkness.

Having been a notorious rotter
In my life until that day,
I then and there renewed at once
All the thousand vows I had made
to redeem myself in life,
And started leading the life of a king
After consigning the radiant Sun
To all the darkness of my life!

□□□

3

I am a Bird

I am a bird
In the nest of becoming
I sit brooding over Time
With myself as witness.

I am perceived by none.
No one espies on me.
That is why,
Unconsciously keeping count
Of events occurring in the world
I remain unaffected,
Though I am myself
A fraction of all events.

I am a bird.
Since time immemorial
I have been flying with wings outspread
Carving gem-facets on the Time-space macrocosm
In the midst of noisy machines,
In spite of holocaust wrought by weapons.

I am a bird unaffected by decay and death.

□□□

4

The Seedling

O you tender seedling
Spontaneously emerging from the womb of the Earth
In a tender infantile body,
And imparting to the primordial darkness
The consciousness of resplendent light,
My obeisance to you!

The quintessential message
Of the Veda and the Gita inherent in your growth
Disseminates the radiant dream of Evolution
Through each twig and branch of yours.
Thereby it absorbs into itself
All tribulations attendant
On the eternal Flow of Time.

O you sprouting seedling
Constituting yourself the very foundation
Of the approaching millennium,
My deep obeisance to you!
For in your full flowering lies
The firm promise of eternity.

□□□

5

My Life

In the infinite vastness of the universe
My life, no doubt, is only infinitesimal.
Yet its long and endless history commenced
From the moment of the genesis of the universe.
And its survival too shall be co-terminal
With the annihilation of the universe.

I am coeval with that primordial man
Who worshipped the sun as one
That brought the seasons of the year
Dancing to my door with their peacock feathers
And until the very doomsday
They all shall go on giving company
To the unending line of my progeny.

□□□

6

The Secret Clue

Why while away life
In vain bargaining
Since I have to respond
To my own voice, having no other?

When the sun
Returns in the morning
All invisible paths
Show up by themselves.

Forging ahead irresistibly
Along the only road available
I must arrive at any destination
Of my own (will's free) choice.

□□□

7

Living

This kind of living
Seems now to have come to stay with me.
My living is a book put out to sea
Sans soul, sans rudder.

Now I can take in my stride
Both, the passionate rise of the sun
Shedding crimson hew
Through the sky
And the sun's departure in the evening
Taking itself away with a heavy heart.

□□□

8

Poem

I have to write a poem.
Please wait for a while
Because every nerve of mine
Needs to be irradiated by the clouds
Filled with thunder and lightening.
The vivacity of the green woods
Has to come crowding from all directions
To hold its play in my very bloodstream.
The mounting waves of the mighty ocean
Have to burst out of each word of mine.

Please wait a little
I have to write a poem.

□□□

9

Guilty

As I put this morsel of rice into my mouth
There appears before my inward eye
The picture of the half-starving farm hand
Working on the field in sun and rain,
And of his children naked and forlorn.
And then... I begin to see myself
As one profoundly guilty.

□□□

10

An Over-Aged Spinster

An over-aged spinster,
I stand alone in the doorway
Like a seventeen year-old damsel
Coyly awaiting her lover.

With eyes suggestive of the language
Of my wordless emotion,
I see the dream-moistened
Covey of birds stealing far, far away from me.

The grief–and-joy drenched melodies
Of my heart are lost
In the obscure darkness of the night
Even as they sculpt the day,
As though the multi-splendoured seasons
Should drop down like parched foliage.

I am an over-aged spinster
Like a seventeen year-old dame!
Even after I depart from here
My dreamy eye shall preen and pry
Into bud after blooming bud.

□□□

11

The Idol in the Temple

After assuming human form secretly,
The idol in the temple one day
Stole out of the sanctum sanctorum,
And started leading a worldly life
In the same way as a human did.

Then the people around
Began to draw it closer to them or push it away
According to the labels, they bestowed on it,
Of caste, creed and community.
The idol realized
How hollow and void of meaning human life is,
How awfully lost in the quagmire
Of hate, jealousy and hypocrisy.

Quite disenchanted, the idol
Discarded the assumed human form
And went back to its temple.
Thereupon the people once again
Consecrated it in the sanctum,
Bedecked it with rich ornaments,
Draped it in many radiant clothes,
Offered to it perfumed sweets mixed with milk and ghee,
And made the temple precincts resound
With their songs of praise and devotion!

Rich and poor, high and low—they all fell
Prostrate, at the feet of the idol.

Many a century has lapsed since then
And many a millennium.
But that idol in the sanctum
Continues to be held in high esteem,
Still adored by countless devotees,
Still taken round in holy procession
On the occasion of annual congregation.
Generation after generation its votaries
Still go on coming to it and going back.
No heed to them the idol pays, nor importance!
That notwithstanding, the Sanctity of the idol
Goes on increasing for ever and ever!
And what about Man?
He too continues to be the same as he ever was!

□□□

12

Future

You can go on mocking at our life
We shall blossom even as we wither,
Tomorrow as you pass by hither
You'll have to droop and
With mortification wither.

□□□

13

Beast and Man

I am a foul-smelling beast!
One day, I told a man
Living a life of utter futility:
Man! The day, I die
At the hands of a butcher,
Shall be the grand day
Of my life.

On the day of death
Progressive people
Of various castes and creeds
Shall throng the market place
To queue in to purchase
My flesh to celebrate
The festivities in their homes
And I will reach.

Every home and hearth.
Then my meat
Being consumed with cheer and burpy relish
Will turn to blood
In so many human bodies
And I will begin to live
In their veins!

And you,
Who live in futility!
In futility alone
Shall die and turn to dust.

□□□

14

My Fingers

My fingers
Dance over the piano keys
Touching the mind of the trees
With ripplets of melodious light.

My fingers
Play the piano with a vengeance,
Laying there
The suppressed hypocrisies

My fingers-
The hands of Time
That go on altering
The very face of the Firmament.

□□□

15

Three Poems of the Beloved

(1)

My love, I came to meet you
Carrying the golden sunshine of love,
Threading through crowded clusters
Through droning machines winding my way
Crossing over rivulets and streams
And then, for you to ask me:
'How come you reached this way?'

(2)

The moon has risen, my love, o'er this city
Has it not risen over your village too?
There, so like your heart
Sprinkling moonbeams from its clear orb
It must be lolling over the leaves
And with the shadows playing

The same moon here, though
In the city, light-puking lamps
Is all but lost in the sky

My love, at this very moment
As I awaken your thoughts
I can see that moon
Risen in your village sky

(3)

My thoughts, my dear, are like a train journey
Switching scene over scene swiftly
Enchanting bungalows, parks, birds in flight...
Painting the roaring sea deftly
They observe the hutments of the slums
Drilling into one's very isness
Heaps of garbage, poverty, stink
And... the beggarliness
That is why, my love, just for a wink
Take me along for a stroll
Through your dreamland.

□□□

16

Ailments

My birds help settle
The fruit and flower laden
Countryside.

And in their beaks
They pick up the world's grief.

□□□

17

Traffic of Living

If my morn dawns here, elsewhere's my even time
The traffic of my living goes on machine-wise.
At time I navigate the seas, at time by car's journey
At times, lost to crowdie throngs,
I become a stranger to me.

Slave of myself, I mock my being
Not knowing the aim of my own living.

If my morn dawns hither, elsewhere's my even time
The traffic of my living goes on machine-wise.

□□□

18

Trees of Trance

As the trees stand rocking in the streaming of rain
In the flora smiles the glinty eye of peacocky-train

Who's this singing while he germinates the earth?
The leafy sheaf of the sky heaves to the tune of mirth.

The cosmos-clasping halo of the contented moment
Plays like Krishna-n-Gopi on the shores of mind irradiant.

Incessant flows the rapturous chant of nectarly ecstasy
Fathoming the rock bottom of the mind
for the steam of sorrow.

□□□

19

Shravani River

I'm a river in Shravan
Swelling heavily homeward
To my mother's.

To that secure domain
Of celebrant colour and
Resplendant melody.

The enduring grace of the shadowy trees
Long have I left far behind me.
My eager step, now, at a run
Has begun to well up in my eyes.
The sky in its own bid
To enthrall me
Has cast my form
Into the looking glass.

Incessantly, my cloud-thirsty lover
Pours down handfuls of showers

Let go! O, let me go just thus
Home to my adored maternal home
Promise I'll be back to bask in the glow
Of my beloved's fortune-secured dome.

□□□

20

Spinsterhood

Decking myself with flower in bloom
I have adored none but you.
Behold!
My chaste maidenhood
I have preserved only for you

My fingers fawny soft on my tender lips honey-dewed,
Just for you the season's heady draught my life has imbued
When the rainy clouds come to a bloom
The sky is emptied clean
My brimming heart awaits likewise
For a downpour, in eagerness keen.
Come and gaze into these eyes
See the sweep of my birdlike dreams

The molten moon is showering me
Pouring down flowers of ruby.

□□□

21

Love-Blue Celebration

Tender part-mellow darkness
Gentle semi-soft translucence
At this love-blue celebration
Glows the star-tree of radiance.

In semi-ripened mellowness
Unconcealed secrets bathe
The moon melting in trance
Rolls over the silvery waves.
In the part-ripened mellowness
The doves pair up unbidden
As the earth becomes a nest
To the snuggling cosmos in slumber.

□□□

22

Punishment

It is not as if
Punishment
For an act committed
Comes through
Just the prison cell.

To be born impoverished
And in want to die
Is also a punishment
Worse than being hanged
Unto death!

□□□

23

Flood

The flood comes bursting over
Washing down
The hedges of temporal evidence
Built by man among mankind!

As the flood recedes
Back arise those hedges.

□□□

24

An Eternal Tree

Within my latent gaze
Rises an eternal tree
It is not imaginary!
Engrossed in meditation
Contemplative like a seer, a *rishi*
Since childhood, I see...

A handful of persons
For four days at a go
Chopped its branch after branch
Felled it from the root
Wiping it off the ground

A bevy of birds on this very tree
Thro' leaf on leaf, branch on branch
Had created temples of melody
As moonbeams and sunrays
Trickled radiance at its feet
Shadowy fays coyly preened away
And when blue-n-indigo clouds
Bearing message of re-generation
Melted o'er its corpulent form
An opulence of gems would drip on...
And blending in the dark with the dark
Gently would this tree merge with the dark.

As the branches of this tree
One after another
Come crashing down, I witnessed
The splinters of childhood memory
Right there, in front of my eyes
The long-term legacy of labour
Of my grand sires and great-grand sires
I saw ruined beyond repair
Likewise, I lived through the misfortune
Of my grandchildren and great-grandchildren
Yet, this tree still bearing on every branch
Its erstwhile affluence just like before
Rises before my latent eyes...
Between man and man
To give evidence of Time
Once again.

□□□

25

In Search of a Path

Why muddle the way as you search for a path?
Having all beside, why dangle by the hair?

Though life is a flower that blooms and fades away
It's to be left to the sun's care and the wind's sway.

The nerve-wrecked canoe of the mind
over roughened sea
Drawns the storms hoping to harbour at
the shore securely

As the stars melt in the darkness of my eye
My etching desire sculpts out the sun.

□□□

26

The Pitch Dark

The pitch darkness
Of utter futility
Will open the way
To irradiance.

Along the illuminated path
Joy will return home,
The starry blossoms
Shall shower down.

With this wealth
As I grow enriched
The morn of fulfillment
Shall dawn in my heart.

□□□

27

Madness

I know not, for whose sake, my heart thus
Begins to float away time and again
As though some garden in spring, too soon
Should begin to shed its seasonal bloom

I know not, for whom, this very smile
Semi-ripe on lips bloom
My throat dries up, and deep down within
The hair follicles awaken the full-moon

Along with my breath in all directions
Splashed, my secret today doth lie
Know not, for what place, is this longing
Welling up to the brim of my eyes

Thinking of me ever so lovingly
Who may it be thus pining for me?
Such is the madness of the mind
Where will its connoisseur be?

□□□

28

Grief

The myriad eyes
Of the stars
Shall speak of my grief.
But say,
Will your stony heart
Be drawn to feel pity?

Why the saga of my sorrow
Should I to the others narrate?
Like a shadow my sorrow
Shall be with me in constant pace.

Holding back the prickly thorns
I gave you all the flowers,
For your pleasure's sake I strove,
Wasting birth after birth.

□□□

29

Ailment

Despite every pleasure
Why should my heart
Curdle with pain?
Seeing misery all around
Why should my wealth
Cringe with shame?

O God, You have dispensed
As my share
This measure of prosperity.
Why then this pain in mine eye
That brooks, not another's misery?

Floods hit by the ton and barrel
So do continual storms lash out.
Why then should I be condemned in this life
With death to be consumed inside out?

□□□

30

Tiny Seedling

You know, my friend:
This tiny seedling in my hand
Will tomorrow grow into a sky-high tree
And adorning itself with seasonal hues
Pose a riddle to Eternity.

Listen, my friend:
You too set your ear to this seed
To listen to its timeless call
And with me, you too
Reveal to your life a glimpse
Of a vision of infinity.

□□□

31

Capital

Wearing the masks of *Haridas*- the traditional minstrel,
They began, after the initial eulogizing *kirtan*,
The Invocation on our behalf
And we were left simply nodding our heads
With our chorus of "Yes, My Lord, Amen."

Observing their sneering smiles
We scratched our heads in vain
And continued to drink from their hand
Enduring the covert insinuation
To the tune of "So be it, my Lord."

With our life as their capital
They laid the foundations of their future.
We went on wasting our life and limb
Singing the glory of their grandeur
Chanting all the while "Yes, my Lord, Amen."

□□□

32

Cotton

Just as the despondent life
Wringing the heart
Should shed
Moment after moment
So do the cotton shreds
From this *Sanver* tree
Moved with suffering
Float in the air.

□□□

33

Sea

I am an idiosyncratic sea

I plant storms in every wave
To rule the world with a roar
Calling out to every direction
I shower them all with clouds.

And when pacified
Moving their oars
I play with the boats
In the waters of the bay
Rocking the terrified birds
Tossing them back and forth.

□□□

34

The Last Rites of a Crow

I am a crow lying dead on a crowded street
And my friends and companions,
Who had been busy
In the lanes and by-lanes of the town,
Have begun to celebrate
The ritual of my death.

We crows belong to a single shade of caste and colour
So amongst ourselves we brook no differences
And religiously avoid eating by ourselves
The dirt, leftovers, delicacies spread around us.
We invite everyone to join in,
To share in the common weal.

And in the same way,
When we crows observe the death of any one of us
We all come together to perform
His last rites with one accord.

In the crowded street I am a dead crow
And my friends and companions,
Crowing in one voice,
Are busy celebrating with one accord
The ritual of my death
Glory be to me, the dead crow
Who was born a crow and
Who died a crow...!

□□□

35

Suffocation

It has been my lot
To listen to all and keep mum
Being witness to all
To pretend that I notice not!

If I speak, I'm blamed for speaking
If I keep mum then for being dumb.
Why should one be such a helpless wretch
With an undesirable burden weighed down?

It isn't as if, none hearkens to my call though!
There are but a few who respond to my heart.

My life is accursed thus: to unearth the truth
Its advancing step is cheated into a halt.

What can one make of such a life?
How should it be termed?
The wounds inflicted are healed
It's the scars that get infected...!

□□□

36

Glow-Worm

At the peak of noon
In the dense palm-grove
Like a naked ray at play.
So are you, O glow-worm!
At this midnight hour
In search of what or whom
Have you descended on my room?

And pray,
In anticipation of whom
Does your heart thus
Glitter and gleam,
Moment after glowing moment?

□□□

37

Hollow Grandeur

While showing off
This yoke of greatness
Around my neck
In other's company
I rented out my very soul
And earned virtue by servility

□□□

38

Calm

This is my calm before the storm
This calm, silently etching the signs,
Envenomed by flowers, blistered by thorns
Engulfing the innermost terror of the mind.

This calm of mine, despondently having cast away the world
Has been moored into life's deserted loneliness.
Rendering the air into a razor-sharp edge
It is waiting to brighten the flames of the sacred pyre.

□□□

39

The Moon and My Eyes

Over the dark branch
Of the obstacle tree
There are millions of lonesome stars

The poor moon
Wanders all alone
And—
My two eyes.

□□□

40

The House

With ancestral blessings
The house was built,
Despite untold hardships,
To find contentment
Within four walls,
Casting aside
The centuries-old
Insecurity of bondage.

The house was so built
That through its doors and windows
Distant birds from outer realms
Should be seen
Enamoured by the scent
Of colourful flora
Come into the front garden
To widen
My mind's horizon.

The walls of the house
Polished shiny bright
With the enticing shades
Of secular thought
And the parlour laid out
With humanistic artefacts
Wherein resting awhile

The gaze would focus
On the legacy of history
And reveal the future
With visionary clarity
But today everywhere in my house
Thanks to the idiosyncracies
Of my family members
Dust, cobwebs, dirt reigns
Cracked, faded walls
Dislodged frames and rafters
And the garden infested
With reptiles and snakes.

My son, young and unsuspecting
Asks me today:
Father, why such state of affairs
In our house?
I tell him just this:
If you do not wish to innovate it
If you wish not to improve it
You too will get used to it.

□□□

41

Chamchas

Great people, it is said
Are born with a golden
Chamcha in their mouth...
May be, that's why
One comes across
'Chamchas' everywhere.

□□□

42

Five Poems from the Hospital Ward

(1)

Sister, I am so accustomed
To listening to your voice
The first thing in the morning
After your night-long vigil.
Tell me,
How do you muster in your voice
That garden fresh verve
Of blooming buds,
That eager tread of the new-born day
And that cozy warmth
Of affection dripping from every word?

(2)

Hospital
A huge tree
And patients-
Each a dangling nest.

(3)

Patient says to the doctor:
"My heart is like a floral bed

Cast a loving glance at me.
Though this body be a suffering sieve
With a gentle word give it relief".

(4)

Hospital is a marketplace of the ailing
Displaying diverse samples
Of ailments in uniform.
Who's the millionaire
And who the mendicant?
Where's the scroll
Of caste and creed?

(5)

I am a patient
On bed number thirteen,
In ward five,
Fancying pictures
Of returning
Home to my loved ones,
I see myself
In those paintings!

Occasionally as the pain
Shoots up my aching back
I writhe in pain
Operated for cancer
Just a few days back

I now live on the hope
Of recovering gradually.

Wonder
Whether my body
Is consumed with the longing
For the dust...!

□□□

43

Rama

Had the naughty adorable Rama
Obstinately demanding
The full moon for a play-thing...
Been a hungry or a semi-starved
Wretched urchin
May be
He would have seen
The same moon
As a plate heaped
With nothing!

□□□

44

In the Shivery Dark

In the shivery dark
The entire environ
Has fallen into
A deep slumber
And I, the chapel,
Tearing asunder
This calm surround,
Sound around
The anguished cry
Of some hapless soul
Dissolving
Moment after moment,
At my door!

Day and night
The Devotees light
The candles of devotion
Invoking the Saint within
And I, the chapel,
In this shivery dark
Express perhaps
The suppressed and suffocating
Timeless grief
Of the same Saint within
Through these anguished cries
Outside my door?

□□□

45

Coolie

Demanding glory for self,
Razing to the ground
The step of illuminating knowledge,
The coolie, renting out his life
To the razzle-dazzle of these
Glittery highways
Has free access to them.

Incanting the names
Of those visionary souls
Who fathomed the invisible depth
Of measureless oceans
To trace the dreams
Of tomorrow's generation.

□□□

46

The Meenakshipuram Conversions

Events like the Meenakshipuram Conversions
Have been documented by me
In my life's diary
For the information of my grandchildren
And their progeny

We who claim the great legacy
Of this country
Such brazen blokes are we
That even the philosophy
Of the visionary minds
Can hardly alter
Our myopic vision of life

That's the reason why
When filthy fanaticism
Eyelessly dogging
The under-privileged
Roams around like a wastrel
Doggedly digging up
Stray dung
Then alone
Are holy shrines
Like Meenakshipuram
Hit with religious conversions!

For a while
After the switch of a religious conversion
The dusty cloud of hollow words
Blows up to rent the air
And then meekly settles down
To mingle with the dust as before.

Such faith-switching folk
Within liberal determination
Engender historical anomalies
Everyone sees them
As make-shift props
But in time to come
You will see
Their grandchildren and their progeny
Cast into the rigid moulds
Of hardened fanatics

Just so,
This puny chic of present conversion
Will accost you in your day
As a ferocious overgrown beast
Throwing its weight around
Overpowering you
With its intimidating claws!

But today
As I pen this down
In my life's diary
I know not why
But thanks to the conversion
Like that of Meenakshipuram

Before my eyes I have a scene
Wherein my grandchildren and
Their progeny
Are moving around that ferocious beast
In their capacity
As a minority community!

□□□

47

The Nandibull

Friends, have you seen, my Nandibull
Who has bolted away from my life?
Jingling the *ghunghroos* of freedom
Dangling around his neck?
The pack of my ambitions are loaded
On his back!

He, it was, who'd taught me:
How to go about drawing the crowds
At every street corner and lane
And shake my treacherous head at them deceptively.
To step into the free-flowing streams
And river beds from place to place
To make the flowing water muddy.

Friends, have you seen, my Nandibull?
Ever since he has bolted away
From my life
My very manliness
Has disappeared into thin air!
And I have come to be a
Thorough good-for-nothing!

□□□

48

Forest of Footprints

These are the storms in my breath
That awaken the sundry directions
Drawing on the welcome warmth of welcome
In my blood
As though light dispels the night

Sometimes these same storms
Play on the flutes
Note of cadence
Moving the finger-like rays
Over streets and by-ways.

As I throw myself with abandon
Into this tempestuous storm
This thick forest of my footprints
Goes thus expanding on...

□□□

49

Ants

We are the community of ants!
Like the citizen not included
In the National Census
Our community marches ahead,
Sniffing around with hope,
With a disciplined tread

Time's dictatorial regime
Ruthlessly crushes and smashes us ants
But we continue to multiply
Like the unfortunate citizens
Not included in the National Census.

□□□

50

My Hands

Once upon a time, these very hands of mine,
Hiding in primitive dwellings
On top of thorny trees or in dark caves,
Used to hunt wild animals for food
Employing stone-weapons or spears:

These very ignorant hands of mine
Put a crown of thorns on the head of Jesus,
Drove him through the town midst insult and injury,
And nailed him high on a crucifix!

These very astonishing hands of mine
Engaged in ever-new inventions
Nullified immeasurable distances in a second
By means of the wireless and television,
And reached out in a jiffy the eyes and ears
Of thousands and millions of people!

These very hands of mine extended forward
Waged fierce wars raising loud war-cries and shouts,
And lets rivers of human blood flow freely!
Likewise, cradling with ghee
Globe-shattering hydrogen and neutron bombs,
They delivered enticing sermons
On the need for mankind's survival!

□□□

51

Entreaty

Oh Sun! I had beseeched you
To assume the form of vitality
And bound across the ocean of darkness
To uncover the mountains of delight

I had entreated you to make the wayward wind
Rediscover it's touch and flow incessantly
To re-establish the bond of the past
With intangible infinite eternity

I had begged you to have a long look
At hoary time, dragged down to dust
And to throw the gates of a new era open
So as to offer the vision of Infinity

Moment by flitting moment this earth
Sinks deeper into the abysmal dark
That was why I had urged you, O sun
To whisper the saga of light in her ears
As you hold her in your arms

String anew, these broken bonds of humanity
And reveal to the world the tearful warmth of history
So had I prayed.
Inject your rays into our body

To infuse within our vital essence
The radiance of your crystal presence

You are the only testimony
To the alpha and omega of events
Such is your august glory
Yet you hardly have any hands at all
To bless me by granting my plea...!

□□□

52

The Emperor

The moment I wore a pair of spectacles
Possessing the capacity to create distorted image
All people around me became diminutive
Like Lilliputians in Gulliver's tale.

Thereupon I gathered the people together
By means of impressive slogans
And, straightening my coat-collars for effect,
Displayed before them the magnified image of mine
Projected by the life-size distorting mirror
In front of which I had posed in advance.

I addressed them in fine style and said:
"Take this image as ample evidence
Of my being a man of boundless proportions!
I am your emperor: You are my slaves:
Therefore sing my praises: Show me obeisance!"

After that I encircled them all
With a flood of dazzling light
And made their shadows disappear forthwith.
Tempting them with palpable stories, further,
I served to them castor oil to drink.
They exclaimed, "syrup! sweet syrup!" and gulped it.

Next, I gave the command:
The orb of moon has lost its gloss.
Make it new with dazzling hues
And put it into my pocket:
Give all the shining stars a technicoloured hew:
Turn the whole limitless sky
Into a huge mirror of diamond facets
And fill the firmament with my own images!

What do you think was the effect?
Just as strangest wonders attend
The flourish of a magic wand,
Each one of the words of my command
Went on assuming the shape of a diamond
And each one of the people gathered to hear them
Went on dropping down dead
As if stricken by a fatal variant of leprosy!

□□□

53

Instruments

When I separated myself
From life's hypocrisy and selfishness
And looked at my reflection in the mirror
I forgot to recognise myself:

When I broke off all connections
Based on God, religion, devotion and culture
And started questioning myself
I felt they were merely chains blockading me:

When saints, seers and prophets,
In reply to my queries about the creator's origin,
Only said that the creator's eternal journey
pervaded the universe
I wondered if it wasn't just a poet fancy:

But when I made a capital of all these
And launched my own business
The same things started appearing to be
So many instruments to make my living resourceful,
To lead me to the very gate of salvation!

□□□

54

The Pang of Pain

Like heavy clouds rushing from unknown regions
To melt into a downpour over thirsty land
A violent pang of pain appeared in my heart
Afflicting my whole body.

The fierce pang of pain rising from my heart
Started looking,
In the boundlessness of mind's existence,
For the futility of the life of humankind
In its endless journey on an infinite road.

The same violent pang of pain
Started excavating history
To find out its own roots
Seeking the explications of the eternal journey
Forwarded by Krishna, Buddha, Jesus and the saints.

O splitting pang of pain issuing from my heart,
Why have you left me here like Trishanku
Dangling in sheer mid air and unable
To arrive neither in hell nor in heaven
While on this endless journey of life
From darkness to darkness,
From darkness to darkness?

□□□

55

Visionary Dreamer

Like a fallen leaf I flow with the tide of Time
Carrying the cross of visionary dreams on my back
This is a glorious cross that immortal Truth envisions
On this eternal path it has infinite significance

I am a speck of whirlwind dust
My reach is across every realm
In the gracious radiance of solar spectrum
I bathe to my heart's content

My habitat is across the wide world
Be it in castle, villas or hutment
My friends are the impoverished ones
The rich also I encounter at every pace.

I am a man
A voyager on the path of evolution
Trying to match death with life
While I suffer the onslaught of the strife
Breathing the breath of Time,
Hearkening to the tidings of infinity
I live among the common folk
And seem just as ordinary!

□□□





I am Man Ashwatthaman is a Sahitya Akademi award-winning collection of Konkani poems, *Hanv Monis Ashwatthamo*. This poetry collection deftly captures angst and distress of contemporary humanity and vivid commentary on modern life and ethos. Plagued by avoidable but daunting challenges of blatant materialism, blind fanaticism and utter loneliness caused by ideological as well as emotional distancing, humankind has been an heir to a sense of futility and vacuity of existence. Much of this poetry is as much personal as it is universal in tone and tenor.

Prakash D. Padgaonkar (b. 1948) is an eminent Konkani poet. He has published seven collections of poetry, *Uzvaddachim Pavlam*, followed by *Vascoyan, Hanv Monis Ashwatthamo, Kavita: Kaaal-Relvecheo, Maan Harshancheo Pavsa Paniyacheo, Sorg Ghodpak Dhortorecho, Vhaunti Nhai Kallachi, Brahmand Yogi Chirantanacho* and *Punararthopanishad* to his credit. He is the recipient of Sahitya Akademi award, Dr. T. M. A. Pai foundation (Manipal) Best Konkani Book Award and Konkani Bhasha Mandal Award.

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